

TikTok users campaign to stop Alaskan oil project

The Toronto Star

March 9, 2023 Thursday

ONT Edition

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Section: BUSINESS; Pg. B4

Length: 463 words

Byline: Mark Thiessen, Isabella O'malley And Natalia Gutierrez The Associated Press

Body

A social media campaign urging U.S. President Joe Biden to reject an oil development project on Alaska's remote North Slope has rapidly gained steam on TikTok and other platforms, reflecting the unease many young Americans feel about climate change.

The #StopWillow campaign has garnered more than 50 million views and counting, and was trending in the top 10 topics on TikTok, as users voiced their concerns that Biden wouldn't stick to his campaign promises to curtail oil drilling.

"It's just so blatantly bad for the planet," said Hazel Thayer, a climate activist who posted videos using the #StopWillow hashtag.

"With all of the progress that the U.S. government has made on climate change, it now feels like they're turning their backs by allowing Willow to go through," Thayer said. "I think a lot of young people are feeling a little bit betrayed by that."

At the same time, Alaska Native leaders with ties to the petroleum-rich North Slope support ConocoPhillips Alaska's proposed Willow project. They've pushed back, saying the Willow Project would bring much-needed jobs and billions of dollars in taxes and mitigation funds to the vast, snow- and ice-covered region nearly 965 kilometres from Anchorage.

The Alaska Native mayors of two North Slope communities - Asisaun Toovak, of Utqia vik, the country's northernmost community formerly known as Barrow, and Chester Ekak, of Wainwright, about 144 kilometres to the southwest - penned an opinion piece for the Anchorage Daily News in support of the project.

In the debate, "the voices of the people whose ancestral homeland is most impacted have largely been ignored," they wrote. "We know our lands and our communities better than anyone, and we know that resource development and our subsistence way of life are not mutually exclusive."

Biden's decision on Willow will be one of his most consequential climate decisions.

Interior Secretary Deb Haaland, who fought the Willow project as a member of Congress, has the final decision on whether to approve it, although top White House climate officials are likely to be involved, with input from Biden himself. The White House declined to comment Tuesday.

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Willow's critics include the Pueblo Action Alliance, which is where Halaand's daughter once worked. The Western Energy Alliance, an oil industry trade organization, claims that creates a conflict of interest for the secretary. Interior spokesperson Melissa Schwartz denied any conflict.

The proposed Willow project is within the National Petroleum Reserve-Alaska, a 90,000-square-kilometre area, a bit smaller than the island of Newfoundland, though about half of the reserve is off limits to oil and gas leasing under an Obama-era rule reinstated by the Biden administration last year.

The Associated Press

Classification

Language: ENGLISH

Publication-Type: Newspaper

Subject: US PRESIDENTIAL CANDIDATES 2016 (90%); US PRESIDENTIAL CANDIDATES 2020 (90%); CLIMATE CHANGE (89%); GOVERNMENT ADVISORS & MINISTERS (89%); NATIVE AMERICANS (89%); INDIGENOUS PEOPLES (88%); SOCIAL MEDIA (78%); STRATEGIC PETROLEUM RESERVES (78%); US FEDERAL GOVERNMENT (78%); TRENDS (77%); BUSINESS & PROFESSIONAL ASSOCIATIONS (74%); RANKINGS (71%); ASSOCIATIONS & ORGANIZATIONS (70%); APPROVALS (67%)

Company: CONOCOPHILLIPS (83%); ASSOCIATED PRESS (50%)

Ticker: COP (NYSE) (83%)

Industry: NAICS324110 PETROLEUM REFINERIES (83%); NAICS221210 NATURAL GAS DISTRIBUTION (83%); NAICS211130 NATURAL GAS EXTRACTION (83%); NAICS211120 CRUDE PETROLEUM EXTRACTION (83%); SIC4925 MIXED, MANUFACTURED, OR LIQUEFIED PETROLEUM GAS PRODUCTION AND/OR DISTRIBUTION (83%); SIC2911 PETROLEUM REFINERIES (83%); SIC1382 OIL & GAS FIELD EXPLORATION SERVICES (83%); SIC1321 NATURAL GAS LIQUIDS (83%); SIC1311 CRUDE PETROLEUM & NATURAL GAS (83%); SIC7383 NEWS SYNDICATES (50%); OIL & GAS INDUSTRY (89%); PETROLEUM PRODUCTS (89%); SOCIAL MEDIA (78%); STRATEGIC PETROLEUM RESERVES (78%); OIL & GAS EXTRACTION (77%); OIL & GAS LEASES (73%); OIL EXTRACTION (73%)

Person: JOE BIDEN (89%); DEBRA HAALAND (78%)

Geographic: ANCHORAGE, AK, USA (79%); ALASKA, USA (94%); UNITED STATES (93%)

Load-Date: March 9, 2023